

## **Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Reno, NV**

### **Pastor Scott Trevithick**

Date: December 17, 2023, Year A, Adapted Lectionary readings using *A Sanctified Art*

Text: Luke 1:57-66

Title: We allow ourselves to be amazed

Focus: What things prompt wonder or awe? When we notice things of wonder around us, we are more likely to experience the in-breaking of joy that renews us when we are weary. In anecdotes and images, the sermon will highlight some things of wonder and awe and invite listeners to share their own.

From *A Sanctified Art*: After Elizabeth gives birth, her neighbors and family celebrate with her. When it comes time to name the child, Zechariah affirms the name given by the angel and by Elizabeth. In that moment of affirming the promise, Zechariah's speech is restored. Everyone is filled with awe. How often do you allow yourself to be amazed? Wonder is all around us—can we recognize it? As we learn how to rejoice in a weary world, can we live in a way that allows amazement and wonder to surprise us often? In Psalm 126, those who expect to reap tears are granted a surprise: shouts of joy. Amazement is a balm for the weary.

### **Gospel Reading: Luke 1:57-66 The Birth of John the Baptist**

<sup>57</sup> Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. <sup>58</sup> Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

<sup>59</sup> On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. <sup>60</sup> But his mother said, 'No; he is to be called John.' <sup>61</sup> They said to her, 'None of your relatives has this name.' <sup>62</sup> Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. <sup>63</sup> He asked for a writing-tablet and wrote, 'His name is John.' And all of them were amazed. <sup>64</sup> Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. <sup>65</sup> Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. <sup>66</sup> All who heard them pondered them and said, 'What then will this child become?' For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

### **Feeling Weary? What Next?**

Two weeks ago, as we entered the season of Advent, we acknowledged that we are weary. Whether that weariness comes from

- uncertain health for yourself or a loved one,
- unyielding responsibilities as a caregiver or from other roles,
- the weight of grief from experiencing a loved one's death or other loss,

- concern for the world in which we live and the polarization and violence which too often dominate the news. . .

And in our weariness, we welcomed the Advent theme from *A Sanctified Art*: **“How does a Weary World Rejoice?”** We heard it as good news that scripture would be honest with us and tell the real-world story of the weariness of Zechariah and Elizabeth as they bore the personal disappointment of not having a child. They are barren and they are, as it is stated twice in the passage, “getting on in years” (Luke 1:7, 18). Not only do they have that personal loss and disappointment, but they experience shame and even blame within the community. Elizabeth acknowledges this as she says that she has endured disgrace among her people (Luke 1:25).

And on that first Sunday, we heard it as good news that our Call to Worship affirmed, **In God’s house, we can be honest—**

**inspired or tired, delighted or doubtful, connected or curious, and everything in between.**

**This is God’s house. You are welcome exactly as you are.**

And so, with hope, we allowed ourselves to ask, “Can joy break in, even when we are feeling weary?” “Can God’s love keep showing up in unexpected ways?”

## **We Find Joy in Connection**

Last Sunday, we had the great pleasure of worship being led by children, youth, and adults in the Kids’ Community presentation of “The Best Present of All.” The intergenerational leadership in its own way affirmed the Sanctified Art weekly theme of “We Find Joy in Connection.” Though we didn’t read the scripture texts designated for that day, they focus on the relationship between Elizabeth and Mary and the mutuality of that connection.

- Mary has been told by the angel Gabriel that she will bear a son. A sign of the truth of that, as crazy as it sounds, is that her cousin Elizabeth is now in the sixth month of her pregnancy. So Mary goes to visit Elizabeth. We can readily see how they would be connected—these two unlikely mothers.
- We, too, are blessed by the ties of community. We find joy in connection. For me, one of the great pleasures in watching the play unfold was the variety of gifts offered by a variety of ages. It’s like how Paul describes how the Church should function in 1 Corinthians 12. The Church as the body of Christ should be like a human body which is interconnected and interdependent. In the Kids’ Community play, everyone had their role, their place. We had children from three years old to high school youth. We had adults narrating, singing, playing instruments, and providing behind-the-scenes support and leadership.
- We hear voices speak and sing in solo and all together.

- We saw dancing angels, barnyard animals, wise men, a bouncing star, and a birthday cake presented to Jesus.

## We Allow Ourselves to be Amazed

I remain grateful for that affirmation from Week 1: **In God's house, we can be honest. You are welcome exactly as you are.**

So as we are honest, we do not expect weariness to instantly go away, but we continue to ask with hope, "Where can joy and hope break in, even when we are weary?"

In response, the Scripture readings and the *Sanctified Art* theme continue to speak in honest and practical ways.

When the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, the events are heavy-laden with expectations set by religious and cultural norms.

- The child will be circumcised and named on the 8<sup>th</sup> day (Luke 1:59)
  - This was following tradition.
- The "neighbors and relatives," (v. 58) though they are an unnamed collective, seem to have great influence in the story.
  - ". . . **they** were going to name him Zechariah after his father" (Luke 1:59b)
    - This is reported as though Elizabeth and Zechariah had nothing to do with it. **They** were going to name him. Sounds presumptuous to me, though maybe that's how tradition is.
  - When Elizabeth, his mother, speaks up to say, "No; he is to be called John" (Luke 1:60), they say back, 'None of your relatives has this name' (v. 61), as though there is no other option. **They** seem skeptical, maybe even judgmental or argumentative.
  - "62Then **they** began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him."
    - It's as though their actions signal, "We don't believe or trust Elizabeth, his mother; she's only a woman, so we turn to the man to ask him."
    - Have you ever had your voice discounted? Have you ever been treated as though what you had to say didn't matter, even when it was your story?
    - Or, how many times is the woman's voice discounted, or the person who is on the outside or a minority or the one with less power in some other way? How many times is that person's voice discounted to appeal to the one with recognized power or authority?

- Elizabeth, the boy's mother, has said that his name is John, but they turn to Zechariah, the one who has not been able to speak for 9 months, to ask him.

This event was heavy with expectations bound up in tradition and cultural norms and yet **“Surprise!”** broke in.

<sup>63</sup>[Zechariah] asked for a writing-tablet and wrote, ‘His name is John.’

And all of them were amazed.”

**What happened next?** <sup>64</sup>Immediately [Zechariah's] mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God.

- Surprise!

<sup>65</sup>Fear came over all their neighbors. . .

- Surprise!
  - That word *fear* in the NRSV, is the Greek φόβος, phobos (fob'-os)
    - We get the English *phobia* from that word.
  - It's most often translated as *fear*, but also conveys terror, reverence, respect, and awe.
  - It's the same root word (though as a verb) when Gabriel appeared to Mary and said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God” (Luke 1:30).
  - The **awe** or the **fear** is the recognition that God is at work here. “Everyone was filled with awe” (v. 65).

This was such a surprise or they were so filled with wonder or awe that they talked about it throughout the whole region (v. 65b). They pondered what kind of person this child would be become and they recognized God's hand upon him (v.66)

They were expecting something or the customs or norms of culture and tradition were dictating one thing and yet **“Surprise!”**

- **Sometimes a surprise is God's hand at work.**

## **Do We Allow Ourselves to be Amazed or in Awe?**

If that's the message (or a message) of this story—that sometimes a surprise is God's hand at work, then let's ask ourselves,

- **Do We Allow Ourselves to be Amazed or in Awe?**

- Are we so bound up in our expectations or perhaps our cultural norms or traditions, like **they** were around the naming of John, that we overlook what God may be doing?
- Or, to use another term or phrase from this theme, are we too weighed down by our weariness that we don't notice the signs of wonder all around us?

At the close of this story, there is a shift. "All of them were amazed" (v. 63). Zechariah, unable to speak for 9 months, had his mouth opened and his tongue freed and began to praise God (v. 64). Fear or wonder or awe came over all their neighbors and they began to talk about what they had seen about this surprise in which they saw God at work (vv. 65-66).

They got talking about how they had seen God at work in the surprises. What surprises or moments of wonder or awe have we noticed that we don't want to let pass by without telling someone?

### I'm working on a list:

- **A newborn baby:** Between services last week, I was talking with Ryan Costella as he was holding his newborn son Rocky. It was just a delight to watch Rocky and see his eyes. Earlier in the day and on some preceding Sundays, I noticed Dale Ressler hold Rocky while he was with Kids' Community while they were practicing for the play and Anna was busy leading something. I was a bit jealous of Dale getting to hold Rocky. A newborn baby prompts wonder and awe.

- Children at play
- People holding hands



- Truckee River—less than ½ mile from Good Shepherd!



- Kids' Community: "The Best Present of All"

In addition to seeing all who took part, seeing the joy on Anna's face as she was leading and directing the kids.



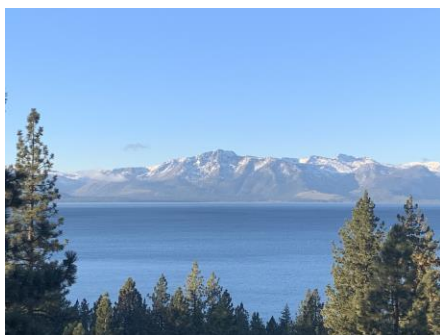
- Sharon: Sunsets and a rainbow



- Eagle Falls, Eagle Lake



- Lake Tahoe and Mt. Tallac



- Cave Rock
- Monkey Rock and Crystal Bay

What else prompts you to wonder and awe?

Thanks be to God for surprises. Thanks be to God for signs of wonder and awe. As we learn how to rejoice in a weary world, may we allow ourselves to be amazed and see God at work.